

Medialised Delhi: Youth, Protest, and an Emerging Genre of Urban Films

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Introduction

In the following article the focus will be laid on an emerging genre of fictional Hindi films that could perhaps be categorized as New Urban Films set in contemporary Delhi. From the disciplinary perspective of visual sociology, films can be regarded as genuine urban films if the big city or metropolis possesses an identity of its own or if certain urban spaces and places acquire a central meaning for the plot (Horwitz et al., 1996: 2). For the specific focus of my article, I would like to expand this definition with regard to what I consider as an emerging genre of urban films set in Delhi, and include the feature of different medialities and mediascapes in the capital which are made visible in these films and sometimes also reflected upon. This may refer to the variety of communication media technologies in general, which are increasingly used by the protagonists in urban films, and more specifically to the corporate media in the metropolis, especially 24x7 news television, which sometimes form an integral part of the storyline. In an article about the new middle classes and the changing forms of Hindi cinema, Rachel Dwyer points out that the impact of new media on society and the way they have transformed society through the emergence of 'mediated selves' remains yet to be studied in India (Dwyer 2011: 186). Taking this statement as a starting point for my article, I would like to suggest that the new kind of urban films which are set in contemporary Delhi provide us with very interesting visualisations and reflections about the process of medialisation in (and of) the capital or, more specifically, about the two interlocking levels of 1) an increasing medialisation of urban lifeworlds and lifestyles and 2) the growing medialisation of politics in India.



Especially the reflexive relationship between youths, youth culture and Hindi films is still an underresearched area, which is even more surprising if we consider the fact that films in India, like in most other countries in the world, find their largest audiences among the young and consumption-oriented sections of society, as Dwyer points out. According to her, the “study of youth culture is likely to be rewarding for that of the middle classes, the section of society where youth culture usually emerges, and also for film studies, as the bulk of film audiences is always from this group” (Dwyer 2011: 190).

In my article, I do not wish to suggest that we should understand the new urban films set in contemporary Delhi as a ‘depiction’ or ‘documentation’ of the social realities of urban youth. Instead, I would like to argue that the new approach to realism that we currently see in these films draws its inspiration from urban youth lifestyles, from the recognition of the important role of media and media technologies in contemporary Indian society and above all, from many ‘real’ locations in the city.

In the first part of this article, I would like to highlight some of the reasons why Delhi has become so interesting for a film industry, which, until the 1990s, was strongly centered on Bombay/Mumbai, and in how far this shift may influence the changing form and contents of fictional Hindi films. In the second part, I would like to include this new genre of urban films in the discussion about the production of new spaces of protest, especially with regard to the new global spaces of urban protests by the so-called mediated youth.

1. Hindi cinema’s new fascination with Delhi

The most significant reasons for the recent shift of focus to Delhi are first of all the connectedness many film directors, producers and screenwriters feel towards the city where they have either grown up or spent the formative period of their education. Secondly, the fact that Delhi was largely ‘underexposed’ and ‘unexplored’ until now serves as an inspiration for filmmakers who more and more seem to look for ‘real locations’. Hindi film producers are also increasingly taking the huge audience for Hindi films in the North into account, which is expected to relate a lot to plots set in Delhi. Perhaps the most important reason can be found in the financial and structural change of the Hindi film industry



in recent years, which in turn is influenced by the demographic situation and changing audience composition.

1.1. "You can take me out of Delhi, but you can't take
Delhi out of me"¹

A number of film directors from Delhi who have become very successful during the last decade or so, are very conscious and outspoken about the multiple ways in which their hometown has shaped their visual perception and imagination as well as their individual identities as filmmakers. Rakesh Omprakash Mehra, for example, the director of *Rang De Basanti* (2006) and *Delhi 6* (2009), quite often refers to Delhi in his interviews. He likes to make pointed statements such as: "I'm a Delhi boy and all my stories are somehow influenced by events from my youth"² or "You can take me out of Delhi but you can't take Delhi out of me". When Mehra's generation of filmmakers, who were born in the 1960s and early 1970s, began their career, there was hardly any alternative to Mumbai if you wanted to work in the Hindi film industry, and until very recently, it was almost inconceivable to live and work primarily in Delhi. But the latest upsurge in so-called low-budget films, which are now made for three to eight crore Rupees, has led film producers to look for manpower, studios, technical equipment and interesting locations outside Mumbai – and Delhi seems to "fit the bill".³ As a consequence, Delhi is now becoming a new hub for actors, technicians and other specialists who move or simply stay in the city, where film equipment is now readily available as well as studios for pre- and postproduction work.

The rivalry between 'world-class' cities in India is another strong motivation for Delhiites who work in the film business and would like to see a more localized film industry in their own city. Accordingly, screenwriter, actor and director Tigmanshu Dhulia thinks that "Delhi should get its own film industry. It is sad that people with talent over here are not recognized. Mumbai is not even located in a Hindi-speaking state, still we make films there, then why not here?"⁴ Dhulia studied filming in Delhi for four years and said in the same interview that "if it was not for this city", he wouldn't have become a filmmaker at all.⁵ He is also a member of the Advisory Board of the Delhi International Film Festival (DIFF), which was initiated in 2012 and, as Dhulia expects, "will



bring opportunities to a lot of youngsters here".⁶ And this is certainly very much in line with the interests that the government of Delhi has in seeing more and more film production activities in the capital, especially if they manage to integrate places like the Delhi Metro into the plot. However, according to Dibakar Banerjee, another film director who grew up in Delhi, but later moved to Mumbai in order to pursue a film career, regarding film primarily as a suitable tool for place or city branding purposes won't suffice to establish a 'film city by design':

For Delhi to snatch away business from Mumbai and set up its own film base like in Chennai and Hyderabad, it will have to go beyond creating another Film City production complex – and it will need several handouts from the Delhi government to succeed.

"Any extra city with infrastructure for a film base is always welcome since it fosters a situation beyond the monopoly," said Shanghai director Dibakar Banerjee. "In theory, it helps, but in practice, a lot more needs to be done before it can become a reality. This can't be a policy-based decision, but it has to emerge out of a whole film culture. It can't be imposed from above. It won't work if the Delhi government wants to do an ego-massage exercise or a propaganda thing."⁷

Another well-known member of the Advisory Board of the Delhi International Film Festival (DIFF) is film director and screenwriter Anurag Kashyap, who has often used Delhi as a backdrop for his films, most vividly in *Dev D.* (2009), a very successful adaptation of the classic Bengali novel *Devdas*, which was set in contemporary Delhi and Punjab. Kashyap appreciates the fact that "more and more films are now being set in real locations" and that they are stories about people in certain environments.⁸ And the fact that until now, Delhi has been 'underexposed' and 'unexplored' on screen seems to be a major source of inspiration for filmmakers who feel that Mumbai has been 'over-utilised' and 'over-exposed' in films.⁹ Some even go so far as to say that Mumbai is a 'dying city', a phrase which was quite often used in newspaper articles of late, while Delhi – being the centre of power and politics – is now sometimes considered to be far more dynamic and that more real stories can emerge from the city besides a boy-girl narrative or the famous love triangle.



"Delhi is one of the fastest growing cities in the world, and Mumbai unfortunately is a dying city. Why tell a story of a place that is dying? There is nothing here that inspires me to tell a story. Today there's just chaos in Mumbai, and progress is happening at a snail's pace (says film director and producer Shoojit Sircar, A/N)". Sircar feels that Mumbai has been over-utilised in films. "From a location point of view, I feel that Mumbai has been over-exposed. There's only so much one can do from a filmmaker's point of view. If I have a choice to pick a place to set a story, then I'll definitely pick Delhi over Mumbai."¹⁰

1.2. From Mainstream to Niche Productions

Along with the financial and structural change of the Hindi film industry, we can also observe a general tendency to move away from so-called mainstream and more towards niche productions, a term which refers to the process of audience segmentation rather than to 'small' numbers of viewers. Today, a pan-Indian mass audience exists even less than in previous decades and Hindi film producers do not make a secret of the fact that urban-young middle-class viewers and the so-called overseas market are increasingly important or perhaps even the two most important target groups for them, and this in turn reflects the increased vertical segmentation of the imagined national audience, as opposed to the regional or horizontal segmentation which had been much more relevant for producers, directors and distributors in earlier decades.¹¹

So from the perspective of film producers in Mumbai, their main target group which is also frequently termed as the 'A grade audience', lives and works in the 15-20 mega metropolises in India – plus the overseas market – and can easily afford the tickets for multiplex cinemas which are much more profitable than the old-style cinemas in economically less important cities, small towns or rural areas in India, not to mention the less privileged Chavanni (25 paise) audience which has no access at all to the world of multiplex cinemas (Deshpande 2005: 186). Film producer Aziz Mirza, rather cynically once put it this way in an interview: "Who cares about the rest? Even Pune is now a 'B' grade centre. When the overseas centres gross 150-160 Mio. Rs., why would a town like Bathinda be important? The time is past when people made films for the chavanni audience" (Deshpande 2005: 192).



However, since there existed no real tradition of a systematic audience or market research in Bombay cinema but rather the more or less justified claim of producers and distributors to 'know their audience' by intuition, the biggest challenge today is to find out what kinds of movies this A grade or multiplex audience really wants to see (see Bose 2006: 39-57). What sort of narratives, aesthetics, language and music really appeal to this predominantly young, consumption-oriented, well-educated and also hard-working audience in urban India and what kinds of characters do they identify with? These have been some of the burning questions for Hindi film producers, directors and screenwriters alike in the last two decades. They become even more difficult to answer when big budgets, high salaries for top actresses and actors, a very costly marketing and merchandising machinery, but also the wages for a huge number of people whose jobs depend on the film industry are constantly at risk. Despite these uncertainties about the multiplex audience, one thing has become very clear from the last years' experiences: It is no longer necessarily mainstream with its established patterns which attracts cinema lovers in the metropolises, but more often what was formerly labelled as niche productions (see also Wenner 2010: 104-105).

One of the Hindi film producers whose name is most closely linked with these recent changes in the film industry and with the emergence of new genres such as urban films set in contemporary Delhi, is Ronnie Screwvala, founder and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the UTV group (United Television). Screwvala produced or co-produced almost all of the critically acclaimed films from the last decade which explored Delhi on screen and thus helped to shape the idea of the city as having a distinct (film) identity of its own and that it forms a new and 'cool' backdrop for plots that deal with urban middle class, youth, crime and/or corruption in the metropolis. To name just a few titles of urban films set in Delhi which were produced by Screwvala:

2006 Rang De Basanti
 2006 Khosla Ka Ghosla
 2008 Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!
 2009 Dev D.
 2009 Delhi-6
 2011 Delhi Belly
 2011 No One Killed Jessica



1.3. Hatke & multiplex films and the new 'hindipendent' flavour in films

According to film journalist and editor Derek Bose, stereotypical figures like the villain or the virtuous hero have become completely outdated and not even the song and dance sequences which were considered a must for Hindi cinema for such a long time, but rather the quality of the script, focus on nuanced characters beyond the good-vs.-bad scheme are what seems to appeal to this young urban audience (Bose 2006: 39-57). As a consequence, much more attention than in earlier decades is now paid to storytelling and to the development of characters (see also Dwyer 2011). And it is especially in this respect that the film *Rang De Basanti* (2006) is considered to have done remarkably well since it is mainly the characters, which for many are the most attractive aspect about this film:

They have become mini icons for the young. What they represent – their values, attitude, lingo and lifestyle – has found an easy echo with GenNow. “Everybody in the audience wants to be part of the group, or they think their own group is as beautiful. They travel with the group and after a point forget that they are fictional protagonists, that’s why they take us home with them,” says Siddharth Suryanarayan who plays Karan Singhania. The drifting, the beer, the canteen, the music, the bikes, the speeding jeeps, the dazzling lights and trendy jackets – these are images and experiences almost every urban youngster has lived with. “The film works if you care about the people in it. I laughed with these guys, I cried with them, I was happy when they were happy and when I came out of the theatre I couldn’t wait to be back,” says Rangan.¹²

Film experts almost unanimously felt that *Rang De Basanti* represented a new direction of Indian youth cinema, introducing new stories and reconfigurations of public and private realities.¹³ To be fair, one should at least mention that films like *Yuva* (2004) by Mani Ratnam and especially *Hazaar Kaun Hai* (2003) by Sudhir Mishra surely helped pave the way for *Rang De Basanti* even if they may not have been equally successful in commercial terms. The film experimented with a complex structure and engaged with the historical memory and



political consciousness of the so-called disaffected youth (see Dwyer 2011). By staging the story of the life of freedom fighter Bhagat Singh, a group of Delhi students get involved in the fight against government corruption and the candle-lit protest the students make at India Gate in this film has been much imitated in real life as well as in other movies. I will come back to this aspect in the second part of this article.

As Dwyer points out, this film's success with the metropolitan audiences made it one of the earliest films to mark a bridge between the mainstream and the new type of 'multiplex' or *hatke* ('different') films, as she categorizes them. Besides Bollywood, which emerged as a particular form of Hindi cinema in the 1990s, she discusses two other major forms of Hindi cinema that are rapidly emerging in recent years.

These are the regional Hindi cinema, notably that made in Bhojpuri, which is associated with India's lower classes, and a new form called "multiplex" or *hatke* ("different"), which is associated with a new metropolitan elite, of which it is an item of cultural production, among the middle classes. (Dwyer 2011: 185)

Dwyer confirms that by the mid-2000s, a new formation of Hindi film appeared which has a different place in terms of production, style, content, location, music, personnel and distribution, and seems a rich source for looking at a new imaginary appearing among a metropolitan elite group of Indians.

Hatke films sometimes have "unknown" actors, often from theatre, and may have character actors recognized from Bollywood films or actors from earlier forms of realist cinema or even their own stars. (Dwyer 2011: 185)

2. New spaces of urban youth protests: reel to real and vice versa

In Germany, the most recent remake of a recurring debate about the allegedly 'apolitical youth' was triggered by a polemic article published in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* in 2008, amidst the commemorative events dedicated to the youth rebellion of 1968. In his article titled "The Sad Nerds" (German: "Die traurigen Streber"), author



Jens Jessen argued that:

[...] youth is not only the sum of personal destinies of a generation, it is also a culture, an ensemble of fashions, books, music and films that are created by young people for the young. But there is no mention of an awakening or revolt anywhere today. Instead, the young adult literature of today is full of gentle lamentations and dominated by personal family stories. And instead of utopian ideas, the only radical thing music can offer today is a dionysian party of oblivion. Even the pathological interest German cinema shows in the destiny of RAF terrorists, is not based on some peculiar revolutionary ideas but rather on a private heroism that replaces politics by personal martyrdom.¹⁴

Even though Jessen's critique was primarily directed at the young generation in Germany, it was interesting to note how closely it resembled the critique that has been formulated with respect to today's youth in India during the last decade or so. Equally to their contemporaries in Germany, the Indian youth is also frequently criticised for their reluctance to fight against social and political injustices. While the older generation is said to always have believed in a better future and in the possibility to overcome the effects of the colonial legacy in India, today's youth is allegedly preoccupied with professional careers, consumerism and their individual happiness. The topos of an historical obliviousness occurred frequently in this media-led discussion in recent years, even though the Indian youth is often said to be very proud of their country.

Linking this debate with the discussion about Hindi cinema and the kind of representations it endorses or marginalises, Sudhanva Deshpande, in his essay *The Consumable Hero of Globalised India* (2005) pointedly asked the question: "Why are young men angry no more?" (Deshpande 2005: 202). Contrary to Great Britain, where the label 'Angry Young Men' was primarily attached to some of the radical intellectuals and writers of the 1950s, the Angry Young Men in the Indian context is a concept, which is closely associated with the young screen rebels of the 1970s and especially with the most famous of all Bollywood icons, Amitabh Bachchan. Films like *Zanjeer* (1973) or *Sholay* (1985) not only made film history but they also set the narrative standards for many years to come. In Deshpande's view, it was above all the poor man's anger, which found a genuine expression in the figure of the young



angry rebel. One could argue of course that the personal revenge of these angry young men for the injustice they had suffered never found expression in a larger social or political movement and that their actions were never dedicated to the struggle for a better future. But what is more important in Deshpande's view is the fact that the Angry Young Man of Bollywood's 1970s was anti-establishment, whereas the new hero of the era of economic liberalisation was the total opposite. He was neither angry nor anti-establishment, but rather rich and most likely to conform to conservative social norms and values:

Welcome to the age of the consumable hero who dances like a dream, and his body itself, rather than his persona, is the object of consumption, much to the delight of the advertising world [...]. None of these young men are any longer "angry". Forget about being enraged by social inequalities, they do not even run away with their beloveds in the face of parental opposition. Conformism is celebrated as valour. (Deshpande 2005: 202)

According to Deshpande, it is not by chance that the new hero of the 1990s and early 2000s very rarely has a visible childhood or that we learn something about a traumatic experience he had made that would haunt him or somehow explain his actions. There is simply nothing he has to remember because he is the creation of a liberalised market that equally wants to ignore the past and rather focus on the promise of a shining present and future (Deshpande 2005: 202).¹⁵ It was thus obvious to Deshpande and many other film critics that the hopes, desires and realities reflected in the most successful romantic comedies of the 1990s are those of a current and aspiring urban middle class.

But as we now know for sure, that was only half the story and despite the fact that none of the film critics and journalists expected it, a new generation of nonconformist young men – and even a few women – has actually emerged out of the shadow of Bollywood's largely conformist heroes and heroines of the 1990s.

2.1. Resurgence of an 'angry youth'?

Parallel to the increasing medialisation of Indian society in general (Schneider 2012: 236-258) and, more specifically, the appropriation



of new media technologies and contents, (not only) the urban youth in India's capital has been getting more involved in social and political issues over the last couple of years. A recently published study on urban youth and political participation in India clearly states that

through the access to media, youth are well aware of political and social issues, are well connected and more opinionated. This encourages them to participate more actively in new social movements and other social and political activities. (Kumar 2013: 30)

Interestingly, the criterium of 'media exposure' seems to have become so central for the gradual process of political mobilisation and socialisation in India that it cuts across gender, class and also across the urban-rural divide (ibid.). As Kumar describes, "amongst those youth who are highly exposed to media, the participation in protest and demonstration is much higher amongst the rural youth compared to the urban youth" (ibid.: 39). Similarly, regarding the much debated question if the recent wave of urban protests was primarily about the concerns of the middle and upper class youth, Kumar points out that it would be incorrect to assume that the participation in demonstrations and protests is limited only to the middle class and upper crust of society, but that it "cuts across youths with various levels of educational attainment and across economic class, though in varying proportions" (ibid.: 40).

It is worthy of discussion, however, if the concept of an increased media 'exposure' really seizes the twofold dynamics of medialisation processes with regard to the lifeworlds and interactions of young people in contemporary urban India. I would argue that 'exposure' conveys primarily the idea of media recipients or 'consumers' who read, listen to or watch specific media contents and are thus more or less engaged with and influenced by them. In view of the rapid growth of 'old' and 'new' media, which India has witnessed since the 1980s, this is definitely a very crucial aspect that needs to be taken into account. But additionally, it has become very clear in the wake of the anti-corruption movement 2011, and once again in December 2012, that many of the young people in Delhi and elsewhere in India are no longer just (passive) recipients or mere 'consumers' of media contents. Like their counterparts in many other societies, they have also become media 'prosumers', which means that they do consume media contents, but additionally they also produce

or distribute a lot of media content through social or mobile media and they constantly adopt new media technologies and integrate them into their individual lives and communicative contexts.

2.2. From reel to real...

In this regard, too, the release and huge response *Rang De Basanti* (RDB) received in 2006 can be said to have marked a first watershed moment in the Indian youth blogosphere. In her analysis of the two blogsites *Blogbharti* and *Blogger*, Meghana Dilip shows that the discussion of political issues and events on Indian blogs increased significantly, albeit temporarily, following the January 2006 release of the film in India:¹⁶

Bloggers (usually) began their posts by discussing the realist manner in which RDB captured the political angst of the urban-educated Indian youth and then went on to draw parallels between the current politicians in India and the corrupt politicians of RDB. Bloggers also strongly condemned the corruption and bureaucracy existing in Indian society. [...] young bloggers censured Indian politicians in power (both in the ruling party and opposition) for their political decisions and behaviour, especially in relation to issues of specific concern to them like reservation in educational institutions, censorship of media and communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in India. RDB makes passing references to all of these issues excluding that of reservation. (Dilip 2008: 30 f.)



Figure 1: The candle-lit protest at India Gate in Delhi.
Source: *Rang De Basanti* 2006 (Film/Screenshot).



Prior to the protests in December 2012 and January 2013, candle-lit protests have sometimes been referred to in a derisory manner as the new form of 'middle-class protests'. But as we have not only seen the brutal reaction of the Delhi police and military forces, who fired tear gas and water cannon against the peaceful demonstrators on screen, but once again also in real life in 2013, the protests after the so-called Delhi Gang Rape at India Gate are now perhaps more seen as a symbol of the emergence of a new form of politics which is influenced and increasingly shaped by the powerful position of corporate news media in Delhi and by the so-called urban youth. Urban youth is not understood as a clearly definable or homogeneous group here, but rather as a category which refers to the lifeworlds and shared lifestyles, emotions and longings as well as a widespread notion of many young people that they are neither represented nor acknowledged by political groups and policy-makers in Delhi. As Sanjay Kumar explains, the slogans that were raised by the youth during their participation in recent demonstrations and protest movements "were mainly against the political class, the politicians and the anger vented by the people in general and youth in particular was anti-politics" (Kumar 2013: 30).

The candle-light vigil at India Gate, as we have first seen them in *Rang De Basanti* in 2006 – and in real life very shortly afterwards in the context of the Jessica Lall case – have been cited as a particularly tangible example of the 'Life Imitating Art' trope and they seem to illustrate the reflexive relationship between urban films and their metropolitan audiences in an almost paradigmatic way. As journalist Shoma Chaudhury noted on March 18, 2006 in the political magazine *Tehelka*:

Sometimes cinema in India subconsciously intuits a latent public mood. In playing the mood back to audiences, magnified by the hyper idiom of Bollywood, it can create powerful role models. Offer potent self-images. *Rang De Basanti* seems to have intuited one such mood. Since its launch on January 26, it has seeped through the veins of this country like a viral, hinting at a contiguous idealism, a common youthful energy that binds the patriots of old with the aesthetes of today. Sleeping idealists: the young have loved the self-image. It has made them feel noble, rung a note of hope. Accustomed to seeing their vacuity constantly magnified on screen in saturated colours and designer labels, stunned by



the constant affirmation around them – in films, newspapers, TV channels – that they are pleasure-seeking automatons committed to little but self-love, they have thrilled to the suggestion that they could in fact be Bhagat Singhs in waiting. In the film, the aesthetes find their catalyst. The audiences seemed to be waiting for theirs.¹⁷

As described above, a new political consciousness has (re)emerged in real life too recently and it gained more strength when the spark of a new global youth movement in 2011 found a strong resonance in the fight against corruption on all levels of politics, economy and Indian society. Different from other countries and world regions, though, the anti-corruption movement here had a central public face, Anna Hazare. Anna's public hunger strike for the implementation of an effective anti-corruption law (Lokpal Bill) was staged as one of the major media events India has ever witnessed.¹⁸ Not only because of the 24x7 coverage on all news channels as well as the meticulous coverage in the press as well as on the web, but especially in view of the strategic involvement of social media by 'Team Anna', the label 'India's Social Media Spring' was soon attached to the Anti-Corruption Movement, while Ramlila Maidan was incorporated as one of the new globally visible physical places of urban protests. It is very interesting to note how often the reference to Tahrir Square was used in journalistic articles in this context, but not all of them would agree that Jantar Mantar or Ramlila Maidan could really be equated with it. Some authors called it 'India's Tahrir Square Moment', while others urged that 'India requires a real Tahrir Square' and a similar discursive framing could be observed in December 2012 and January 2013 when the combination of social media activism and urban street protests, which seems to have become a characteristic feature of new protest movements, was even more prominent.

2.3. ... and back to the reel

A couple of months before the protests against corruption occurred in several physical places in India as well as on screens and media spaces all over the country, a political thriller set in Delhi, *No One Killed Jessica* (dir. Rajkumar Gupta), was released in 2011. The film combines documentary as well as fictive elements in order to narrate the Jessica Lall case from a perspective in which corporate news media



form an alliance with an increasingly disenchanted Delhi youth and thus together represent an emerging counter power vis-à-vis a deeply corrupt political elite and judiciary. Besides the continuous coverage on TV, SMS activism and the afore-mentioned candle-lit protests are two important characteristics of the new form of protest as they had actually become visible and meaningful in 2006. The first half of the film has detailed documents involving the murder and the court trial while the second half is dramatized using the fictional character of television news reporter Meera, played by Rani Mukherji. Meera symbolizes all the media professionals and news stations in Delhi who played a key role in bringing about public protests and finally the retrial of the case, and before the film begins, we are informed in the very first minute that (00:43min)

(T)he depiction of the media in our film is a representation of numerous media professionals and media institutions that worked actively and tirelessly in the follow up of this case. We would like to thank all of them.

The story begins in April 1999 when model and barmaid Jessica Lall is shot dead by the son of a wealthy and influential Member of Parliament from Haryana, merely because she refuses to serve him drinks after closing time. Initially a number of witnesses testify of the murder to the police, but they retract from their statement in court under pressure. Jessica's sister Sabrina Lall pursues the case for several years, but after repeated trials, the accused person is acquitted in February 2006, which also led to nationwide protests in real life. It was not by chance at all that this public outcry coincided with the enormous success of the film *Rang De Basanti* which is about the political consciousness of young students in Delhi and about the citizen's fight against government corruption. The fictional news reporter in the film *No One Killed Jessica*, Meera, decides to revive the Jessica Lall case as she strongly feels that justice has been denied. Through permanent SMS activism, a candlelight march at India Gate and many other forms of public protest, the case is finally reopened and the accused is convicted and imprisoned for life. The film was quite successful, even though it was not a big commercial success, but it received predominantly positive reviews from film critics. To say that it was a 'media-friendly' film seems like a huge understatement as it has some features that may well remind us of very sophisticated public

relations campaigns. It also has to be mentioned that we see the original logo of NDTV (New Delhi Television, founded in 1988) throughout the film, a fact which makes the initial statement of the filmmakers regarding the “numerous media professionals and media institutions” seem quite odd, otherwise they could have chosen a fictive name. Nevertheless, *No One Killed Jessica* is a very good example for the different approach to style, content, location, music and personnel that we can observe in the emerging genre of urban films set in contemporary Delhi.



Figure 2: India Gate.
Source: *No One Killed Jessica* 2011 (Film/Screenshot)

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Figure 3: Interview.
Source: *No One Killed Jessica* 2011 (Film/Screenshot)



The film begins with a very interesting kind of prologue, which is more than five minutes long, and weaves together three distinct levels of visuals and imagery, of music and of Meera's autobiographical voiceover narration (in Hindi and English) of what she perceives as the essential characteristics, harshness and incomprehensiveness of her native town Delhi. Alternately, we hear the rocky chords and lyrics of the song "Dilli Dilli", composed by Amit Trivedi and written by Amitabh Bhattacharya, which also refers to the hardness, power and 'arrogance' of this city, while we see a long sequence of fast cut scenes mixed with images of some well-known places in Delhi. Above all, we see (and hear in the background) a lot of the notorious Delhi traffic in this remarkable prologue – congested streets and flyovers, a fight between a cyclist and a car-driver and the passersby in between. Meera's voiceover narration starts the moment we see a still of India Gate and the prologue begins with the words:

"Delhi 1999. One year ago India had conducted a nuclear test and joined the nuclear power club. The world was moving into the new millennium"

(images of traffic and Delhi police).

"And, I had just begun reporting for a news channel
(1:22min, image of a flyover).

"I was posted in Delhi"
(rock song "Dilli Dilli" begins).

And Meera's voiceover continues:

"Delhi, the city where I was born"
(scene on a public bus in Delhi: we see a young woman standing inside the bus, while a young man is fastly walking toward the front; very deliberately, he jostles the woman's shoulder and moves ahead; her look is perturbed, but she barely turns her head and remains silent).

"People say, if Mumbai is about money, then Delhi is about power"
(2:13min).

"Connections... Influences... Contacts... Without these, any application is futile"

(camera perspective from below onto a queue of people waiting in front of the Delhi Jal Board, which was constituted in 1998; it is responsible for the production and distribution of drinking water in the capital; the counter is suddenly closed and all the people who were waiting are upset and left alone with their concerns)

(traffic congestion)



Meera's voiceover:

"And every fight is about who you are. Everybody is somebody in Delhi. Nobody is a nobody (2:38min)"

(an outraged cyclist tears open the door of a big car and forcefully tries to pull out the driver, right in the middle of a heavily travelled road; the driver fights back with his feet and hands and the two men get into a fight on the street) (background: film song "Dilli Dilli")

Meera's narration continues:

"Are these pearls of wisdom or an over-simplification?"

(change of scene to the government quarter)

"I'm not sure. So, I tried to understand Delhi my way...I failed"

(camera perspective from within a moving car)

"I wondered if Delhi was like any other metropolis"

(3:17min) (image of Anzal Plaza in South Delhi, one of the first major shopping malls in the capital, opened in 1999).

"But the more I learnt, the less I understood. Finally, I gave up trying."

(image of Qutub Minar)

"Delhi was gearing up for the summer with water coolers"

(4:27min).

"And for the Cricket World Cup with TV sets. But then the spotlight moved from cricket and the heat ... to another big event. The Pakistani army and militants seized the Kargil peaks"

(original footage from news reports).

"The Indian Government landed (4:52min) a major military operation to reclaim Kargil. The Kargil war had begun. Indians wore patriotism on their sleeves"

(young men driving on their motorcycles through the streets of Delhi, Indian flags in their hands, shouting "Jai Hind!").

"In the past, cricket united the country and now the war"

(original footage of soldiers and images of young men mobilizing the 'home front').

"I was reporting from Kargil when another incident took place.

Something that would change the face of politics and power in Delhi (5:20min)".



Conclusion: Media/lised activism and urban street protests in Delhi – a new kind of politics?

On the one hand these protests were much localized – the protesters occupied very specific real spaces – on the other they had a global megaphone effect. I believe this format of protest is the format of the future. It is centered in very thick localities, with very material practices and then it has the global dimension, to large extent created by the social media.¹⁹

Many political and social scientists in India currently debate and wonder if this new form of media-cum-urban street protests, as we have first seen it in the initial form of candle-lit protests on screen and later in real life as well as in real-time on TV, is a feature of a new kind of politics. Political scientist Zoya Hasan acknowledged in an interview in 2013 that it actually is a new kind of politics: “It is a reaction to the misdemeanors of politicians and misgovernance. The middle class which dominated these protests has become assertive”.²⁰ But at the same time, Hasan thinks that the urban street protests have a flip side and could turn dangerous too, as this movement “has delineated itself from organized politics. It has no agenda. It is leaderless, chaotic and lacks vision”.²¹ Like many other observers, she sees the danger that it could even lead to “authoritarian solutions like the protesters demanding the death sentence for rapists” in January this year.²² Other observers also noticed with some scepticism, that “the current wave of protests is not led by any political party, leader or individual, which was a norm during the Hazare campaign. It was rather spontaneous and coordinated and mobilized largely via social media”.²³ While some see the positive potential in current protests and in the new kind of sociopolitical awareness amongst youth which “could take democracy to a new level and redefine the role of the people in it”²⁴, others think that due to the lack of leadership and a clear ideological background, there’s always the danger that the movement could be ‘hi-jacked’ by actors who have no concern for it.

However, according to sociologist Saskia Sassen, the critical statements with regard to the lack of leadership or ideology, which were very similar in the context of the Occupy movement, somehow miss the point. Rather than seeing it as a question of party politics or power, Sassen includes the protests in Delhi – and in other cities in India in



2013 – in a gradual global process in which the middle classes are increasingly disconnected from the liberal state because they don't feel that they are represented by the state any longer. Even if the trigger and reason for the new kind of urban street protests may be very specific in every case, Sassen argues that it was always also about a larger mix of injustices, not least what she calls the "grand larceny" of tax revenues and state resources which are increasingly fed into the global corporate system:

I think of it as grand larceny because it goes well beyond the privileges enjoyed by rich firms and rich families in all our countries. This partly explains why middle class people everywhere, from Chile to Egypt to India were taking to the streets to protest this in different ways. [...] In short, something is happening. But we don't have a language that captures this mix of conditions. [...] One very general reason is that the social contract with the liberal state is not working any more. The elites are not affected and the super poor never got any benefits. It is the middle class which got so many benefits [...], now there is a new geography of privilege and disempowerment that cuts across the old divide of rich and poor countries, or North and South. And the ones that are emerging as the contesting actors are young men and women of the middle classes. They are the ones losing the most, who feel the social contract with the state is broken.²⁵

Even if Sassen's interesting reading of the protests in Delhi as another local manifestation of the new 'global street' phenomenon surely deserves much more in-depth discussion, I think that her way of looking at the recent wave of protests is helpful if we want to understand the prehistory and complex process which led to the presence of an 'angry youth in Delhi' who feels alienated from politics and yet strives to change the country. Especially if we try not to see and explain these developments exclusively within the parameters of the Indian nation-state or Indian society, but as something which is "neither fully national, nor fully global"²⁶, as Sassen suggests, and thus in many ways connected to the new global phenomenon. It will be extremely interesting and also very relevant in this context, to see how more and more urban films set in contemporary Delhi are going to explore, rehash and narrate the kind of stories that exhibit a brand new 'triangle' which is so very different



from the old love triangle in Hindi films: Youth, Media and the City (or: Youth and Media in the City; or: Youth in the Medialised City etc.). Urban films as a medium, conversely, shape and reinforce the visual images, perceptions and viewing habits vis-à-vis the metropolis and may thus add, in the context of the new urban protests on screen as well as in real life, to the production of new spaces of protests in Delhi. From this perspective, the genre of urban films set in contemporary Delhi, which has been emerging since the mid-2000s, can help us to understand the sociopolitical and media-communicative dynamics which have led to the new forms of urban youth protests that we've been witnessing since 2006. Notably, in the context of the Jessica Lal case, or, to a much larger extent, in the context of the anti-corruption movement of 2011, and especially in the very recent context of protests against sexualised violence against women in India.

Endnotes

- 1 Film director Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra as quoted in the following article: Ghosh, Tanushree. 2011. Delhi's got a Belly for Delhi. *Business Standard*, 2 July, http://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/bollywood-s-got-a-belly-for-delhi-111070200078_1.html [retrieved 19.05.13].
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- 9 See also Baliga, Shashi. 2012. Is Bollywood moving to Delhi? *GN Focus/India*, *gulfnews.com*, 26 Jan., <http://gulfnews.com/gn-focus/india/is-bollywood-moving-to-delhi-1.969773> [retrieved 19.05.13].
- 10 Joshi, Tushar. 2012. Delhi over Mumbai for B-Town filmmakers. *The Times of India*, 19 May, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-0519/newsinterviews/31777562_1_delhi-boy-films-shot-in-delhi [retrieved 19.05.13].
- 11 See for a more detailed discussion of this aspect, Chap. 2, "One Size Fits it All: Vanishing Formulas, Market Research, Missing Link" in: Derek Bose (2006). *Brand Bollywood. A New Global Entertainment Order*. New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: SAGE, pp. 39-57.
- 12 Joshi, Namrata. 2006. My Yellow Icon. *Outlook*, 20 Feb., <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?230266> [retrieved 19.05.13].
- 13 In April 2013, a documentary on the impact the film had on the youth in India was released under the title *Ru-Ba-Ru* (85min). "The film revolves around a group of carefree friends, who turn rebellious and take on the government with a drastic measure to make a point against corruption in India. The documentary takes the theme of the film forward and captures real-life incidents, which also highlight the concerns touched upon in the movie - be it the candle-light protest to get Jessica Lal's murderer convicted or the protests led by Anna Hazare"; Baksi, Dibyojyoti Baksi. 2013. Documentary on the impact of *Rang De Basanti*. *Hindustan Times*, 17 April, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Entertainment/Bollywood/Documentary-on-the-impact-of-Rang-De-Basanti/Article1-1045662.aspx> [retrieved 19.05.13].
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- 15 It should at least be mentioned that other authors observed the appearance of unemployed young men as disoriented loafers ("tapori" in Hindi) in the 1990s. "The educated unemployed young men, wandering about, flirting or simply ,waiting for something to happen,' was a central motif in some of the popular comedies produced by Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Sai Paranjape in the 1970s and 1980s. But in the 1990s and 2000s, the tapori became a staple of popular Indian cinema (Jeffrey 2010:14). As Jeffrey mentions in his ethnography of young men in Meerut, the "theme of waiting emerges strongly in recent research on unemployed young men in India" (ibid.: 13).
- 16 The film was released with about 600 prints in India and in the so-called overseas market over the extended Republic Day weekend in January 2006. Not only did it start off exceptionally well and turn out to be one of the most successful films of that year, (which also happened to be one of the most successful years ever for the Hindi film industry), but *Rang de Basanti* was also one of the most fervently debated films in recent years. Very few experts would have predicted this enormous response from the young audience, the most obvious reason being that the promotional campaign for this film didn't follow any established pattern since Aamir Khan decided to almost exclusively communicate with his younger viewers in Internet forums, chatrooms and TV studio discussions. See Joshi, Namrata. 2006. My Yellow Icon. *Outlook*, 20 Feb., <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?230266> [retrieved 19.05.13].
- 17 Chaudhury, Shoma. 2006. Sleeping Idealists? *Tehelka*, 18 March, http://archive.tehelka.com/story_main23.asp?filename=hub031806Sleeping_idealists1.asp [retrieved 23.05.13].
- 18 For a critical discussion of this aspect, see for example Rajagopal, Arvind. 2011. Am I still Anna when nobody is watching? *The Hindu*, 7 Sept., <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/am-i-still-anna-when-nobody-is-watching/article2433081.ece> [retrieved 25.05.13]. See also the comments on Kafila.org:



- <http://kafila.org/tag/anna-hazare/>
- 19 Pawlowski, Lukasz. 2012. The Global Street or the Democracy of the Powerless. Interview with Saskia Sassen. *Kultura Liberalna*. No. 163 (8/2012), Feb 21, <http://kulturaliberalna.pl/2012/02/20/the-global-street-or-the-democracy-of-the-powerless/> [retrieved 27.05.12].
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